

Funhouse - School offer free online courses

▼ *Anonymous donor funds program*

By **MARGIE DOYLE**
Editor

This fall, thanks to a generous and anonymous donation from a community member, students who head back to Orcas Island Public School, will again have the opportunity to earn credits through the Funhouse's Online Learning Program (OLP). And this year, thanks to the donor, no fees will be assessed for the program, which operates through the state Dept. of Education-approved Digital Learning Commons (DLC).

By going to the internet website www.learningcommons.org, students at the Funhouse can connect to The Digital Learning Commons (DLC), which provides the online curriculum. The DLC is a nonprofit that acts as an accrediting agency; it reviews and screens the classes it offers – this semester, 654 of them.

This is the fourth semester that the Funhouse and the School District have offered this option to public school students. Last year, 10 to 12 students were enrolled.

Late this summer, Pete Moe, Executive Director of the Funhouse, reported that an anonymous donor had provided “generous support” to support the High School and the Funhouse's participation in DLC. The donation underwrites the fees per class, which are usually between \$300 and \$400. Last year, the Funhouse charged \$100 per class.

“It was the intention of the grantor

to support the public school by making available to kids any class they want, thereby making the public school that much more attractive to families and thus increasing enrollment,” said Moe.

Again this year, Catherine Laflin, school district teacher, will be back at the helm of the online learning program. “She created the program, and figured out what works and what doesn't,” Moe said. Laflin acts as coordinator, oversees progress of the students and acts as a liaison between the online teachers, the school, the students and the parents.

In addition, Laflin matches each registered OLP student with a local mentor. “Mentoring has made a huge difference for the kids, especially the ones doing foreign languages,” Laflin said. The mentor-student pair usually meet outside of the two hour class period, depending on the student and the class. The mentor may help by proofing an essay, giving individualized math help, or other personalized assistance.

“Kids in the high school are getting to that stage where they want exposure to something real ... to find out what that world is like and how the classes they are taking might relate to the world outside of school,” Laflin explains.

“We are lucky to have a community not only willing to give their time, but also comprised of such talent and variety. Some of the relationships between the mentors and the students have lasted beyond the length of the class, which is a real measure of success in my eyes,” said Laflin.

All online classes take up two reg

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ular class periods a day at the Funhouse's OLP. There is always someone there to oversee and take attendance and do any technical trouble shooting, Laflin said. “Last year that was me, but this may change a bit.” In any case, Laflin will oversee the coordination between all involved -- the online teacher (who is a certified teacher in the area of the course offered), the student, the parent and the school.

As Coordinator, Laflin promotes the program within the school, registers students for courses, and makes sure all the paperwork is in order. Before students are registered, they sign an agreement outlining their responsibilities as an online student and parents sign an agreement that they will reimburse The Funhouse for course fees in the event that a student doesn't finish a course. Both agreements ensure that students take their online classes seriously.

“We're serving the students that want classes in special interest areas like German, 3-D animation, or scriptwriting, as well as widening the AP class options. We also have students who find the traditional classroom a struggle and need a change or an alternative,” Laflin says. “I view [online courses] as keeping those kids on both ends in school, providing options for pursuing personal goals and helping them get into college.”

“If students want to take

obscure but advanced classes, the Funhouse will do whatever they can to allow the student to take the class and complete it,” Moe said. Of course, there are some classes that don't lend themselves to online instruction, such as woodshop or advanced labs, he added.

Students who have not passed classes have the opportunity for “credit retrieval” at no extra cost, Moe says. “Drop-out prevention is what we're all about. One of the neatest things to see is both ends of the bell curve working together.” Moe adds, “Those guys aren't in the same room together that often, and here they can socialize a little.”

Laflin said, “We have less than 400 students total in K through 12, and that can get really small for the kids once they enter high school. With online courses, students say ‘Wow, here's something different and I can converse online with students from all over.’ It widens their community, which in turn enriches the community that's here.”

Moe wants to get the word out to students as they register for classes this fall that the online learning program is ready to help them. “The intent of the online program is to make the public school strong and attractive, and to address the problem of enrollment, given the horrible state of funding from the government. Be that as it may, this may help to increase the numbers.”

Visit the DLC online at www.learningcommons.org. The available class list is at www.learningcommons.org/educators/courses/.